

A presentation to the Mekong River Commission
by
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-American Rivers protects and restores rivers for the benefit of people, fish and wildlife

-We were founded in 1973 to protect clean, free-flowing rivers through the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act. We are based in Washington, DC and the Northwest Regional Office – founded in 1992 -- is our largest regional office.

-The initial focus of our NW office in the early 1990s was on restoring salmon and steelhead in the Columbia basin

-Nationally, we continue to focus on protect the last, best free-flowing rivers using the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act and other tools. We also work to improve dam operations, remove dams where their economic and environmental costs outweigh their benefits, improve protection for floodplains, and ensure adequate water supplies for communities and river ecosystems.

-In the Columbia River system, we have worked with the Army Corps of Engineers to restore habitat in the Columbia River estuary and we have worked with other federal agencies to seek funding for tributary restoration.

-The collaborative work we've done with the Corps in the Columbia estuary is something we would like to do throughout the Columbia Basin, but controversy over management of the federal hydrosystem has stood in the way of that.

-We support stronger measures to reduce the impact of the dams on the Columbia and Snake Rivers -- we believe that the Corps and other federal agencies in charge of managing the federal dams in the Columbia Basin have not met their legal responsibility to protect and restore salmon and steelhead populations listed under the Endangered Species Act, and cannot do so until they address the survival "bottleneck" that the dam/reservoir system causes salmon and steelhead, particularly during the migration downstream as juveniles.

-Since at least the year 2000, we have not had a satisfactory forum to express our views on the hydrosystem. We have won lawsuits resulting in rewrites of the federal dam management plan, but unlike other parties have not been invited to a table where federal agencies were willing to seriously consider our input.

-We believe that restoring Columbia Basin salmon is achievable with the federal dams on the mainstem Columbia River in place, but we support removing the four dams on the lower Snake River. It makes sense to remove these dams to help meet Endangered Species Act requirements and for its own sake – the dams' removal would be good for the Northwest's economy and quality of life.

-The benefits of the lower Snake River dams are relatively modest compared to the the benefits of the dams on the Columbia, and they cost the region 140 miles of beautiful free-flowing river and compromise the health and long-term viability of salmon and

steelhead runs – even though above the dams lies the most extensive, best quality spawning habitat remaining in the Columbia Basin. The magnitude of the mistake of building these four dams only grows as the region's economic success depends more on quality of life and natural amenities and less on resource jobs. We have a lot of dams and a lot of reservoirs, but only about 50 miles of free-flowing river left on the Snake and Columbia in Washington state. And as global warming makes improving the ability of salmon to access the high altitude spawning habitat in the Salmon River basin even more crucial.

-The Columbia-Snake hydrosystem was overdeveloped. If the region could go back in time and revisit the choices regarding the development of the river again, it is doubtful we would design dams that do not allow for fish passage – like Chief Joseph, Grand Coulee, and Hells Canyon dam – and we likely wouldn't have built add-ons to the system like the four on the lower Snake. Even some who now oppose removing the lower Snake River dams would oppose their construction if we had it to do over again.

-My advice to the delegation from the Mekong River Basin is to avoid making the same mistakes that the Northwest and the United States made when it came to overdeveloping the Columbia Basin. Hydropower unquestionably has an important role to play in providing low carbon emissions energy, but you can build too many dams for a river system to handle from an ecological perspective.

-Finding a balance is key to protecting fisheries and other elements of the ecosystem, traditional cultures, recreation, the economy, and the quality of life. I can't say for sure that I know what the precise balance in the Columbia Basin should be, but I am quite confident that the scales in the Columbia Basin have been tilted too far toward development of the river for power and navigation.

-It's not for American Rivers to say what river management strategies are appropriate in other countries, but I urge the Mekong delegation to develop their basin in a slow, considered manner, and to think about whether a particular project that might seem to make sense in the near-term is likely be regretted by later generations.

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